

James A. Allison Mansion
("Riverdale," now Marian College Library)
3200 Coldspring Rd.
Indianapolis
Marion County
Indiana

HABS No. IND-68

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. IND-68

ALLISON MANSION
("RIVERDALE," NOW MARIAN COLLEGE LIBRARY)

Location: 3200 Coldspring Road, Indianapolis, Marion County,
Indiana.

Present Owner: Sisters of Saint Francis, Marian College, 3200 Cold-
spring Road, Indianapolis.

Present Use: In 1970 the Marian College Art Department adapted the
upstairs and the downstairs sun rooms as art studios.
The rest of the mansion has been restored and is now
used as a conference center and the originating point
for historic tours of the community.

Statement of
Significance: Built over a three year period, 1911-1914, this house
was constructed of reinforced concrete with an exterior
veneer of red brick. The house remains much as it was
in 1914 when Indianapolis businessman and entrepreneur,
James A. Allison, lived here. A pioneer in the auto-
mobile business, Allison was a co-founder of the first
company to produce an efficient headlight for early
automobiles; in addition, he founded his own company
which designed and developed high-powered motor launch
engines. Allison was a co-founder of the Indianapolis
Motor Speedway and an early financial backer in the
development of Miami Beach, Florida.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of erection: 1911-1914.
2. Architect: H. L. Bass.
3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1936 Marian College ac-
quired Allison Mansion.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Artisans were imported from
Switzerland and Italy to handle the wood and marble carvings.
5. Original plan and construction: The mansion is a red brick,
two story structure trimmed in band carved stonework. The
mansion is estimated to have cost at least \$2 million when
constructed. The walls are composed of poured concrete re-

inforced with steel; the exterior red brick is a veneer. Wood is used only as a decorative feature. There are five large bedrooms and a sleeping porch, a dining room, breakfast room, kitchen, library, a French style sitting room, conservatory, grand reception room, and an aviary. There is a third floor attic and a basement with several social rooms, plus a 20 x 60 foot tile swimming pool.

The two-story hall features a German silver and bronze chandelier valued at \$10,000 in 1914, a hand carved fireplace large enough to stand in, and a sweeping staircase leading to the lobby's balcony and the second floor. Velour covers the walls.

The French sitting room, immediately off the hall to the west, is decorated in the style of Louis XV. The walls are covered with pink, hand-embroidered silk moire, set in white gumwood frames. The white marble fireplace, gumwood chair rail and the electric wall sconces all express an atmosphere of elegance.

The dining room has a fireplace with an intricately carved fruit motif. The adjoining breakfast room is of white gumwood and has nine windows.

The sunken conservatory, at the back of the first floor, originally housed an \$18,000 Aeolian organ. Its pipes were covered by an elaborately carved wooden screen. The white mahogany paneling is carved with a music motif, a design which is duplicated by plaster castings on the ceiling. French doors, protected by wooden screens, open onto the sun porch across the north side of the house overlooking a small lake.

The library is across the hall from the conservatory. The walls are covered with embossed leather and the woodwork is intricately carved mahogany. There is a hooded rockwood pottery fireplace with a herringbone design in the firebox. The bookcase doors are wrought iron and glass.

At the end of the hall is the sunken, white Italian marble aviary. Italian sculptors matched the marble perfectly and topped bannisters with hand-carved Phoenix. There is a stained glass roof which was restored and re-erected about 1944 by Marian College.

The basement has several social rooms and the 20 x 60 foot heated swimming pool. A small den located in the basement has a sloping Gothic ceiling covered with sporting scenes on embossed leather. Its stained glass windows and doors are made of multi-sized, colored bottles set in wrought iron.

There are five large bedrooms on the second floor each with its own fireplace. A long summer sleeping porch is located on the north end of the building.

Floors throughout the house are of oak parquet and all woodwork is hand carved of solid mahogany. The exception to the use of mahogany is the gumwood used in both the sitting room and the breakfast room. The arches and doors are gothic and the ceilings are high beamed.

The attic has three storage rooms, the elevator mechanism and a gigantic reinforced concrete support for the chandelier. Four observation porches provide expansive views of the surrounding community.

6. Alterations and additions: The physical appearance of the Allison Mansion has changed little since 1914. The only major changes have been the enclosure of two porches and the removal of a stained glass roof from aviary. This was restored to its original position about 1974.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

James A. Allison was a pioneer in the automobile business. He was co-founder of the Prest-O-Lite Company of Speedway, Indiana, which produced the first efficient headlight for early automobiles. Allison subsequently sold his interest in this company to Union Carbide Corporation which now owns the firm. Allison was the founder of Allison Engineering Company which designed and developed high-powered motor launch engines later adapted to airplanes. Several years after his death in 1928 the company was sold to General Motors and now excels principally in manufacturing airplane engines. Allison joined Carl G. Fisher and Frank Wheeler in founding the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Also in association with Fisher, Allison was an early financial backer in the development of Miami Beach, Florida.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views:

Photographs taken ca. 1916 of interior of the mansion by an unknown photographer, negatives are in the possession of Marian College.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Indianapolis Times, 10/16/36.

Indianapolis News, 10/17/36.

Indianapolis Star, 8/27/37.

Files of the Allison Division, General Motors.

Interviews with former employees, personal and business associates, relatives and with the Marian College Office of Public Information.

Adapted from the National Register nomination form prepared by Jane C. Sprague, 1970, and the HABS form prepared by Robert Henzel, 1963.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Built over a three-year period, 1911-1914, this house was constructed of reinforced concrete with an exterior veneer of red brick. Advanced construction techniques were employed in the erection of this house which remains much as it was in 1914 when it was completed.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Foundations: Sandstone.
2. Wall construction finish and color: Reinforced concrete with an exterior veneer of red brick.
3. Structural system, framing: Reinforced concrete.
4. Porches, stoops, bulkheads: On the south facade there is a porte-cochere. An aviary is located on the west end of the building. A veranda extends from the porte-cochere to the southwestern most corner of the building.
5. Chimneys: Five large brick interior chimneys with decorative capping.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Front door on south elevation behind the porte-cochere. A second doorway at the end of the side hall at the southeast corner of the house opens onto a small stoop and leads to the driveway.

- b. Windows and shutters: Triple and double windows, double and triple sashes eight-over-eight, ten-over-ten, and eight-over-eight-over-eight. On the west wing there are three double windows, twelve and twelve vertically, which are separated by two pairs of double engaged columns. On the second floor a group of four windows are flanked by single columns.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Low hip roof with deep soffit covering of tile. The roof was recently repaired and the original tiles were duplicated.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The eaves are simply decorated by flat dentils which have a slightly raised center.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: There is a hipped dormer window on the east and west elevations and three on the north elevation.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: The floor plans have not been significantly altered since 1914.
 - a. Basement: Several social rooms, a small den, and a 20 x 60 foot heated pool.
 - b. First floor: Grand reception room, dining room, breakfast room, kitchen, conservatory, hall, French-style sitting room, library, sun porch (now enclosed), and an aviary.
 - c. Second floor: 5 bedrooms, bathrooms, and a sleeping porch which is now enclosed.
 - d. Third floor (attic): Three storage rooms, elevator mechanism, and a reinforced concrete support for the chandelier.
- 2. Stairways: A massive open-well three run stairway of heavy ornately carved mahogany is located in the grand reception room.
- 3. Flooring: Floors throughout the house are of oak parquet.
- 4. Wall ceiling finish: Wood, marble, and plaster.
- 5. Doorways and doors: Doorways are composed of ornately carved mahogany woodwork. In most cases there were once heavy curtains hanging in the doorways. There are glass doors leading

from the hall to the French sitting room, library and conservatory.

6. Hardware: In the two story hall there is a German silver and bronze chandelier. This was valued at \$10,000 in 1914. A gigantic reinforced concrete support for the chandelier is located in the attic.
7. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Lighting: Electricity. The main electric service and breaker panels are mounted on a solid marble slab approximately 1 1/2" thick, 72" high and 50" wide.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The main entrance to the house is on the south facade. The Allison Mansion overlooks a small lake on the north and is set one half mile west of Coldspring Road and one and three-quarters miles north of the intersection with West 30th Street. There is stone terracing and landscaping on the north side of the house.

Prepared by Candace Reed
Architectural Historian
National Park Service
January 19, 1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was part of a cooperative project conducted in 1970 by the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana and the Historic American Buildings Survey. The project was under the general direction of James C. Massey, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey.